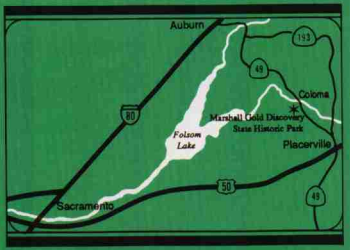

Marshall Gold Discovery
State Historic Park
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CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS

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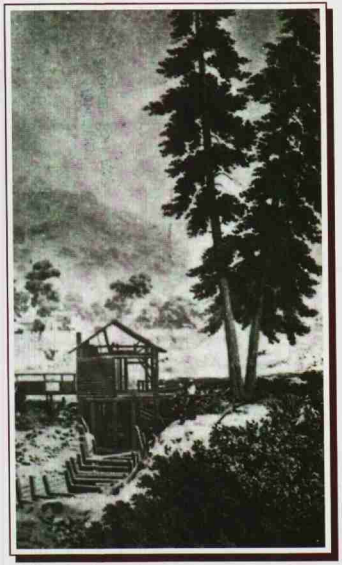
Design & Layout by Ron Warr

Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park

Site of California's Gold Discovery, January 24, 1848



CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS

What If There Had Been No Gold?

California was a pastoral backwater and wilderness in 1848. The non-Indian population was about 14,000, and the whole area had just recently been acquired by the United States as part of the settlement of the Mexican-American War. Relatively few Americans would have been able to more than guess at California's exact location on a map. The American frontier had crossed the Missouri River and was moving slowly westward while a small stream of overland pioneers – a few hundred each year – were finding ways to bring their wagon trains across the deserts and mountains.

But all that changed with the discovery of gold. The non-Indian population of California reached 20,000 by the end of 1848, 100,000 by the end of 1849, and soared to 223,000 by 1852. By then, people from all over the world knew of California and were fascinated by its golden riches.

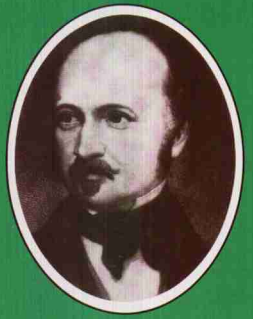
Very few "49ers" intended to stay – to establish themselves and their families in California on a permanent basis. Most of them were ambitious, optimistic young men who had come to "seek their fortune" and then return home. But many did stay – or returned later to become permanent residents of the Golden State.

Over the next fifty years some 125 million ounces of gold were taken from the hills of California. (Some $50 billion worth by present-day values.) More important than the monetary value of the gold, however, was its impact on the early development of California. If gold had not been discovered, California's advantages of climate, resources, and favorable location for world trade would have been ignored for another generation or two. There would have been far less interest in building a transcontinental railroad that would bind the nation together. The U.S. treasury would have been considerably smaller, the national government far less able to finance and otherwise cope with the terrible tragedy of civil war.

A gradual influx instead of an avalanche of "foreigners" from the U.S. would have meant that the newcomers could be absorbed into California's existing Spanish/Mexican economy, which was based on cattle-raising and agriculture. That starting point and basis of development would undoubtedly have resulted in a far different California than we know today.

January 24, 1848

John Sutter's vast agricultural empire in the Sacramento Valley needed lumber for its new construction and expansion projects. Sutter had obtained some lumber from Fort Ross, which he had purchased from the Russian-American Company in 1842. And a few of his men were whipsawing lumber by hand near what is now Sutter Creek. But a larger and steadier supply was needed.



John A. Sutter

To solve this problem, Sutter asked James Wilson Marshall, one of his workmen, to build a sawmill in the mountains. Marshall selected Coloma because it was the closest place to Sutter's Fort that had a suitable mill site: a river for power, and, on the south side of the valley, a stand of large pine trees that could be cut up into lumber. The two men were to be partners, Sutter to supply capital for the enterprise while Marshall superintended the mill's construction and operation.

In September 1847, Marshall and about a dozen workmen went up into the hills to start construction. By year's end the mill was ready to operate, but one unexpected problem remained. A low dam had been built across the river to raise the water level and funnel part of the stream into the diversion channel that would carry water through the mill. This channel was called a millrace. The lower part, the tailrace, carried water away from the mill and back into the river. Unfortunately the tailrace was too shallow. Water was not moving downstream away from the mill rapidly enough. And because the water was backing up, the big millwheel would not turn properly.

In order to solve the problem, the tailrace had to be deepened all the way down to bedrock. Each day, therefore, the mill workers and a number of Cullumah Indians removed boulders and dirt. At night, water was allowed to run through the ditch to wash away loose debris.

On the morning of January 24, 1848, while inspecting the tailrace, Marshall spotted some shining flecks in the water. He scooped them up and, after testing them with his fingernail and pounding them with a rock, he placed them in the crown of his hat and hurried back to announce his find to the others: "Boys," he said, "By god, I believe I have found a gold mine."

"Monday 24th. This day some kind of mettle was found in the tail race that looks like goald, first discovered by James Martial, the Boss of the Mill."

–From Henry Bigler's Diary

Skeptical, everyone tried various tests on the substance – pounding, boiling in lye, heating – but it passed them all. Four days later, Marshall decided that he must take the news to Sutter.

When he arrived at the Fort with a sample of gold wrapped up in a handkerchief, Sutter checked his encyclopedia, made various tests and confirmed Marshall's conclusion.

Mindful of his investment in the mill and his desperate need for lumber, he and Marshall agreed to keep the news secret until the mill was completed and in operation. After all, they didn't know the extent of the deposits. Gold had been discovered in California before, but the strike had soon petered out.

The Word Gets Out

But too many people already knew of Marshall's find. The secret could not be kept for long. In fact, Sutter himself was among the first to let the cat out of the bag, and the news soon reached Sam Brannan, one of the partners who owned a general store at the Fort.

Brannan was an elder in the Mormon Church, and most of the workmen at the mill were former members of the Mormon Battalion. So when Brannan went to the mill to see for himself, they readily gave him a tithe of the gold they had obtained in their spare time. When he got back to San Francisco in the first part of May, Brannan paraded the streets waving a quinine bottle containing the gold and shouting, "Gold, gold, gold, from the American River!"

Though many Californians had heard rumors about the gold discovery, it took Brannan's quinine bottle to convince them. Once convinced, however, they acted promptly. By June 1, San Francisco was reported to be "half empty" as the able-bodied males departed en masse for the mines. This scene was repeated up and down California as people everywhere responded to the irresistible cry.

And it wasn't long before the rest of the world heard it, too. Confirmation of the rumors for those in the East was President Polk's announcement of the find and, even more convincing, a tea caddy full of gold that was brought back to Washington by an Army officer. Soon half the world had experienced gold fever: "A frenzy seized my soul. . . piles of gold rose up before me at every step; castles of marble. . . thousands of slaves. . . myriads of fair virgins. . . the Rothschilds, Girards, and Astors appeared to me but poor people."

Coloma, Queen of the Mines

The sawmill site at Coloma soon lost its peaceful, wilderness aspect. By droplets, then rivulets, then torrents the gold seekers arrived, and the town grew to a population of several thousand. In the wake of the hopeful miners came storekeepers, doctors, girls, lawyers, gamblers, ministers – all the services required to supply the miner and relieve him of his burdensome gold dust.

From Coloma, the miners spread up the river canyons and into the mountains. As news of rich strikes elsewhere spread, and as the placer gold in the vicinity gave out, Coloma gradually lost its eminence and, in 1857, the El Dorado County Seat was transferred to Placerville. By then, the patient Chinese were almost the only miners working and reworking the gravel bars near where Marshall had made his historic find. Coloma became a peaceful agricultural hamlet, specializing in grape growing.

The Discoverer

James Marshall had come to Coloma in a roundabout way. Born in New Jersey in 1810, he worked his way west until he reached Missouri. There he stayed for six years, carving out a farm on the east bank of the Missouri River and working as farmer and carpenter.

Eventually, however, he began to suffer from the malarial fevers that plagued many other residents of the low-lying Missouri bottom lands. His doctor advised him to seek a healthier climate, and so it was that Marshall began to pay close attention to stories of California. People who had been there were describing it as a sort of earthly paradise. In 1844 Marshall joined a wagon train headed for Oregon. In June 1845 he left for California with a small party of would-be settlers.

He arrived at Sutter's Fort in July and was immediately hired by John Sutter. Craftsmen were scarce in California and Marshall had practical experience as a coach-builder, carpenter, and general mechanic. He was, by all accounts, "handy" at all kinds of carpentry and construction. Then thirty-four years old, Marshall had completely recovered from his fevers and was anxious to get back to farming. He purchased a ranch on Butte Creek, but continued to work for Sutter.

After serving for over a year with the American forces during their conquest of California in 1846, Marshall returned home to discover his cattle strayed or stolen. Nearly penniless – he collected the princely sum of $36 for his Army service – he went back to Sutter's Fort looking for work. Sutter was delighted to see him again and, before long, put him to the task of looking for a site for the famous sawmill.

James W. Marshall

After the discovery of gold, Marshall claimed ownership of a good portion of the Coloma Valley, but before long there were just too many would-be gold miners in the area. In July 1848 Governor Mason visited Coloma and estimated the population at 4,000. Marshall was employed as a prospector by several miners during 1848 and also prospected on his own. At times, however, his steps were dogged by less experienced prospectors who hoped that he would lead them to another strike. Some even believed that he had special powers of divination and threatened him with violence if he refused to help them find gold. Fearing for his life, he stayed away from Coloma for six months.

He was an inactive partner in the sawmill after 1848 and his partners had trouble getting along with him. Despite fantastically high prices for lumber, there were management problems and the mill was soon entangled in legal difficulties. It was abandoned and remained useless after 1850.

Marshall spent the next few years prospecting and doing carpentry work. He was eager to find a vein on which to try his method of extracting gold from quartz. During this period he was forced to sell his ranch in order to settle his accumulated debts.

In 1857, Marshall returned to Coloma and bought fifteen acres of land for $15. He set out a vineyard on the hillside above the cemetery and built a cabin near the Catholic Church. He and a partner by the name of Hutchins made furniture, saddle trees, rockers, water wheels, and coffins. He spent a lot of money on new and exotic varieties of grapevines, dug a long cellar and began to make wine for sale.

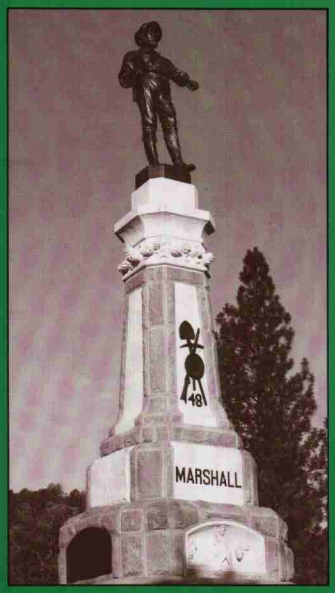
By 1860 his vines were doing so well that he received an award for his entry in the county fair, but in the late 1860s a lessening demand for fruit, high taxes, and increased competition sent him prospecting again.

During the 1860s Marshall became part owner of a quartz mine near Kelsey. His partner, William Burke, persuaded him to go on a lecture tour to supply the funds needed for development of the mine. But neither the tour nor the biography that Burke published were financially successful. The tour ended in Kansas City where Marshall found himself penniless and unable to continue. As a philanthropic gesture, Leland Stanford paid Marshall's fare to New Jersey where he visited his mother and sister. They were happy to see him, but were shocked by his poverty, his many eccentricities, his short temper and his heavy reliance on liquor. After a few months he returned to Kelsey and took up residence in the Union Hotel.

In 1872, after several unsuccessful attempts, a bill was passed by the state legislature that provided Marshall with a $200-a-month pension for two years. Marshall used the money to pay some of his debts and equip a blacksmith shop close beside the Union Hotel in Kelsey. The state pension was reduced to $100 a month in 1874 and renewed in 1876, but allowed to lapse in 1878 after sharp criticism of Marshall's personal habits – especially his weakness for liquor. Legend has it that when Marshall came to testify on his own behalf before the State Assembly in 1878, a brandy bottle dropped out of his pocket and rolled along the floor.

Over the next few years, Marshall continued to work in his blacksmith shop and in the two small gold mines he owned near Kelsey. He was a regular at the local saloon and sometimes walked from Kelsey to Coloma or Georgetown to visit friends, drink, and socialize. He also made frequent trips to Placerville for social purposes and occasionally went as far as Sacramento or San Francisco.

James Marshall died on August 10, 1885 at the age of 75 and was buried on a hill in Coloma overlooking the gold discovery site. A monumental statue was commissioned and placed on the hill to mark his gravesite.



The Legislature voted $9,000 to erect a monument honoring the gold discoverer, and thousands attended its dedication in May 1890. Marshall's statue still overlooks Coloma, pointing to the spot on the American River where it all started. The bronze-coated zinc statue was cast in San Francisco in 1889.

Marshall dedication, May 1890.

The Park

About seventy percent of Coloma is included in Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park. Since there are only about two hundred year-round residents in the town, the tree-lined streets of the park are memorably quiet and serene throughout much of the year. Most visitors come during the summer or for special events including the annual celebration of the gold discovery.

The park features a number of buildings that have survived from the gold rush, as well as many other reminders of that tumultuous period. The Gold Discovery Museum features gold-rush-era exhibits including mining equipment, horse drawn vehicles, household implements and other memorabilia as well as a number of films about the gold discovery and early mining techniques.

The Mill

Sutter's Mill replica.

An outstanding attraction of the park is the full-sized replica of Sutter's Mill. The original was abandoned and vandalized, and finally disappeared in floods of the 1850s. The replica, looking as much like the original as extensive research could make it, was completed in 1968. Constructed through the combined efforts of the El Dorado County Historical Society and the Department of Parks and Recreation, the mill is operated regularly for park visitors. Check the current schedule at the museum/visitor center. Some of the original mill's timbers were reclaimed from the river and are displayed nearby.

The Exhibits

Throughout the park, you will see artifacts and exhibits about the gold rush – mining methods, household articles, tools, and way of life. Exhibits in the museum/visitor center tell the story of Sutter and Marshall, and of the gold discovery that so drastically altered their lives. Movies on gold mining and the gold discovery are shown in the visitor center. Special arrangements for group tours should be made in advance. A self-guiding trail makes it easy to visit the site of Marshall's momentous discovery as well as other points of interest.

Many of the trees you see — Tree-of-Heaven, black locust, catalpa, persimmon, and others – were planted by homesick miners as reminders of their former dwellings. In the Wah Hop store, you will see some of the items that members of Coloma's sizeable Chinese colony needed as they patiently sifted and resifted the sand and gravel of the riverbed in search of gold.

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Mormons and the Discovery of Gold, by Norma Ricketts

California Gold, by Rodman Paul

The Handbook of the Indians of California, by Alfred L. Kroeber

The Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 8, California, by the Smithsonian Institution

California, an Interpretive History, by Walton Bean

Sierra Nevada Natural History, by Storer and Usinger

The World Rushed In, by J.S. Holliday

When You Visit

The buildings of Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park are open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. They are closed on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's days.

If you would like to be married in either of the park's historic churches, make arrangements at the park superintendent's office.

The park has three picnic areas (see map). The Coloma and Lotus communities include a number of private campgrounds and stores. There are no campsites in the park. An orientation brochure is available at the museum/visitor center. Recreational gold panning is allowed on the east shore of the river.

Please Help

When James Marshall first saw the Coloma Valley, the grass-covered hillsides were completely free of litter. Now, we need your help to keep them that way. Whatever you bring into the park, please take it out with you.

When you hike, stay on the trails. Shortcuts destroy the ground cover and speed erosion. The river shoreline contains submerged obstacles and an uneven bottom. Diving is not permitted.

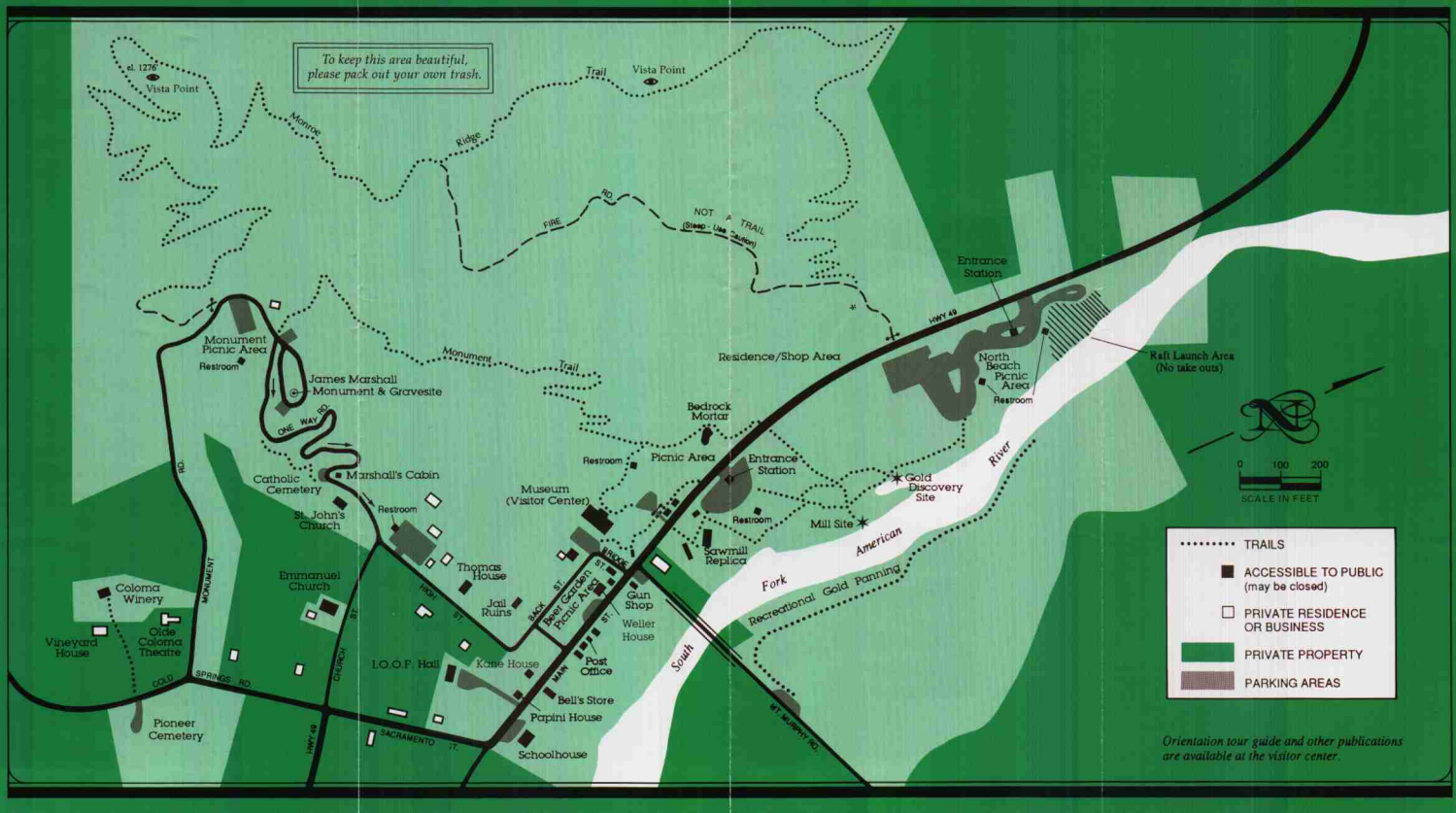
For further information about the park and park activities or special events, please contact:

Gold Discovery Park Association

Marshall Gold Discovery
State Historic Park
P.O. Box 265
310 Back Street
Coloma, CA 95613
916/622-3470
or
916/622-6198

The Gold Discovery Park Association is a private non-profit organization providing financial support for interpretation, education and service at California's gold discovery site in Coloma. Call or write for membership information.

Cover photo from an original painting by Charles Nahl



Orientation tour guide and other publications are available at the visitor center.